DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 438 710 FL 026 135

TITLE	Language and the Department of Defense: Challenges for the 21st Century.
INSTITUTION	National Foreign Language Center, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1999-12-00
NOTE	6p.; Published monthly. "An interview with Glenn H. Nordin, Asst. Director of Intelligence Policy (Language and Training), Office of the Asst. Sec. of Defense, C3I.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Foreign Language Center at Johns Hopkins University, 1619 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., 4th Floor, Washington, DC 20036. Tel: 202-667-8100. For full text: http://www.nflc.org/publications/policy_issues.asp.
PUB TYPE	Journal Articles (080) -- Opinion Papers (120)
JOURNAL CIT	NFLC Policy Issues; v2 n2 p1-4 Dec 1999
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Computer Assisted Instruction; *Interviews; *Language Enrollment; *Language Proficiency; *Military Personnel; Military Schools; *National Defense; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; *Second Language Programs; Second Languages; Uncommonly Taught Languages
IDENTIFIERS	*Department of Defense

ABSTRACT

This interview with Glenn H. Nordin, Assistant Director of Intelligence Policy (Language and Training), Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, explores in depth the officially perceived language needs of the U.S. military in the foreseeable future. Questions and answers include the following: How has the end of the Cold War affected Pentagon foreign language needs? There is more need for expertise in the harder to learn and less commonly spoken languages, such as Serbo-Croatian, as intervention and peacekeeping duties increase; What are the most in-demand languages now? The in-demand languages include Russian, Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Persian, Somali, Haitian French Creole, Albanian, Serbian/Slovak, Slovenian, Urdu, Hindi, Gujarati and the languages of West and East Africa. Other questions include: What skill levels are required for these languages? How is the department of defense meeting these needs and what are the challenges? Can the academic world supply sufficient numbers of foreign language speakers? Can technology, especially the new translation software, make a significant difference in the struggle to meet foreign language needs? What long-term steps has the department of defense taken to meet its needs? (KFT)

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ED 438 710

NFLC *policy issues*

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Glenn H. Nordin has been surrounded by languages other than English all his life. Born in a Minnesota farming community of a mixed Norwegian-Swedish marriage, he studied Russian at the Army Language School, the Army Russian Institute, University of Maryland, and George Washington University and Vietnamese at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center. A military intelligence career placed him in close contact with language issues and defense needs for language skills. Mr. Nordin was one of the first translators assigned to the Washington - Moscow Hot Line. Later, as a defense contractor, he designed and built the first all-digital workstations for language specialists. In the five years before assuming his present duties, Mr. Nordin has served as Executive Secretary to the Director of Central Intelligence Foreign Language Committee, Chairman of the Interagency Language Roundtable, and President of the Society of Federal Linguists.

Q: Given the changes of the past decade – the end of the Cold War superpower rivalry with the USSR and its client states, and the proliferation of ethnic violence and small-scale conflicts, have the language requirements of the DoD changed? I wouldn't say they have changed. I would say the true requirements are now gaining recognition. From 1945 to 1990 we knew the major threats to our national security and the languages those threats entailed. The needs for many other languages were simply ignored or given low priority. With missions including peacekeeping, humanitarian aid, nation-building and training of foreign military personnel, more than 40,000 U.S. troops are or have been stationed in more than 110 nations (excluding NATO countries and Japan) since 1991, including every nation in Latin America, all but two of the fifteen successor states to the USSR, some forty nations in Africa, and throughout South and Southeast Asia. More than 140 languages are spoken in these nations. The ability to communicate with military forces of other nations in a coalition, the ability to communicate with the people in a disaster stricken country, the ability to act as peace-keeper in situations such as Bosnia and Kosovo, demand higher skills in listening, understanding, and speaking. Cultural awareness is essential in such operations. That awareness and understanding is facilitated by sound knowledge of the language.

Q: Since the language requirements are essentially global, which languages at the moment are in greatest demand? Our greatest needs are in harder to learn and less-commonly-taught languages. Russian, Arabic, Chinese, Korean, and Persian demand our attention because of our international involvement in the regions where those languages dominate. In the recent past, we have had to scramble for Somali, Haitian French Creole, Albanian, Serbian/Croatian, Slovenian, Slovak, and other languages. The emergence of India and Pakistan as nuclear powers demands that we study the most common languages of those countries - Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati. The

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languages of West- and East- Africa are languages that we need.

Q: What skill levels are required for these languages? The needs of the Department of Defense (DoD) range from "survival language" to polished, near-native ability. In terms of the language skills required, DoD needs include speaking, listening, and reading; some positions may require equal proficiency in all three, where other positions require higher listening or speaking proficiency.

Q: Given these broad range of languages and skills, how does the DOD meet its language requirements? We provide basic language education for our military linguists through the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) at the Presidio of Monterey in California. The school provides resident language education in about 20 languages and assists some 250 command language programs of the military services. (For languages not taught at DLIFLC, we turn to the School of Language Studies at the Foreign Service Institute and to commercial language training companies.) The school does a good job of producing language specialists with proficiency at ILR level 2. We have language specialists in active and reserve forces and civilian agencies whom we deploy to meet specific needs. Contract support by independent free-lance linguists and language service companies is becoming an attractive alternative to maintaining a large active force of language specialists. Some 500 contract linguists support our peacekeeping force in the Balkans.

Q: Could you describe some of the challenges DoD faces in meeting its language requirements? We face a number of challenges in meeting the immediate and long-range language needs in the Defense Department - and these are mirrored in every federal and state government, in the courts, in NGOs, and in corporations doing business overseas. Perhaps the greatest challenge we face is the general apathy toward learning foreign languages. Another challenge we all face is predicting our needs for specific languages and the types of operations or relationships that will require those languages. In an operational sense, we face constraints in the resources available to meet language requirements. Simply put, language is expensive. It takes 47 weeks to train a military linguist to minimal professional proficiency in a language such as Russian, and up to 63 weeks in languages such as Korean and Arabic. In general, four years of college with emphasis on language and a year abroad are required in the Academic sector to achieve the same result. Keeping the cost of language under control by constraining the number of languages taught entails accepting risks - such as the closing of DLI's Serbian/Croatian programs in 1993, a year before we began our involvement in the Balkans. Finally, we have permitted a philosophy of the "disposable linguist" to prevail - train and let them go, even encourage them to leave the services with tuition benefits. In the long run, this pattern of "educate and release to other pursuits" may have favorable impact: although I have no studies to prove this, personal observation tells me that many leaders in international affairs and business gained their first instruction in language at the DLIFLC.

Q: Is the belief that the academic sector can supply language to the DoD incorrect? It is, given that the number of students pursuing language studies in K-12 is not high enough to yield a reasonably adequate supply, even in the more commonly taught languages. Our education systems do not ensure quality and motivation in early language teaching and learning. Innovative programs started by dedicated and capable language teachers frequently fall out of favor with school administrators because of low enrollments. In the colleges and universities, the number of graduates with language degrees has steadily declined - and many of those are oriented toward literature rather than communicative or business language. A recent study by Dr. Ray Clifford, Provost, DLIFLC, found that the DLIFLC teaches 13% of all college-level classroom language instruction in the U.S., (by hours of instruction) while the School of Language Studies of the Foreign Service Institute teaches 2%. Those numbers indicate that the 2800 to 3000 language students that we educate annually in the US Government represent a significant portion of the national supply in those languages.

Q: Why not simply privatize language services to the DoD? Two factors make this difficult: First, the economic needs for language in the US are different than national security needs - the private sector doesn't have large Farsi requirements, for example. This means that the private sector hasn't developed all of the kinds of language services DoD needs. Second, American businesses and contract language services often use foreign nationals, something we can't do across the board where national security is involved. Third, there are no national standards for quality assurance in translation and interpretation. (The Defense and State Departments and the FBI have in-house standards.) Quality control is an important aspect of contracted language services, and is just now receiving the attention needed. I know that you at the NFLC together with the ASTM and language service users and providers are working to develop voluntary standards.

Q: We've all seen advertisements for translation software. Can technology help to meet DoD language requirements? Machine translation (MT) has made great strides, but it remains a language tool, requiring human linguists to build the dictionaries and edit the resultant translations. MT can provide a filtering mechanism when employed as a part of total retrieval system that includes human language expertise. At present, we simply do not know what the cost/benefits of MT are, when compared to the employment of human translators. And MT works just for written texts. Speech recognition and production technology lag behind MT, in the volumes of information that can be processed and quality of performance. Moreover, no computer program can bring the cultural knowledge and skills required of tasks such as interpreting at negotiations, in-depth intelligence analysis, and daily in-country interactions.

Q: How are you addressing these challenges? For example, what strategic planning has DoD undertaken to meet its language requirements? We are developing the first strategic plan for the Defense Foreign Language Program. First we must articulate our needs and the resources required; then we must prioritize allocation of resources by mission and language. Our own needs and requirements assessments indicate that we have large and heretofore undocumented needs in language. That is, when military units are deployed, commanders realize that they have a language problem, one that is frequently overlooked in deployment preparations. However, the translation of planning into billets for language training requires specific policy directives to pay attention to a given part of the world. The commanders and planners have no authority to devote resources to areas not included in current national policy. We are thus somewhat limited in the contingency planning we can do for language support services. What would be extremely helpful is to begin to integrate DoD strategic planning efforts in language with other sectors - private and public sector needs analysis and strategic planning, and integration with the language supply and capacity sectors.

Q: What do you see as the first step towards coordination of national strategic planning in language? What would be extremely helpful is to begin to integrate DoD strategic planning in language with consumers and providers in the other sectors, public and private. We must form active partnerships with the language services industry (whose yearly volume is estimated at some $20 billion), with the education systems that sponsor language learning, with the non-government language organizations and foundations and finally with the corporations doing business abroad. In my opinion, this "outreach" is best done through an institutionalized national entity, one that brings partners together from all sectors. We had a glimpse of the possibilities when the government funded the Center for the Advancement of Language Learning. I also believe that the federal and state governments bear an inherent responsibility for the investment in language related research (how we learn and use languages, technology for learning), education in the less-commonly-taught languages, and development of standards for quality controlled language services. We need to draw the language learning community and the language users together to champion and focus our energies.

National Foreign Language Center
Policy Issues

William P. Rivers, Editor

The National Foreign Language Center is a non-profit research and policy institute committed to the improvement of US capacity in languages other than English. *NFLC Policy Issues* are intended to serve as a catalyst for debate by identifying issues of importance to our understanding of national language needs and national language capacity. *NFLC Policy Issues* are authored by NFLC staff as well as senior policy-makers, language consumers, and language providers from the Government, Academe, and the Private Sector, and are distributed to congressional, executive branch, industry, and educational policy-makers. The views expressed in *NFLC Policy Issues* are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the views of the NFLC or The Johns Hopkins University.

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